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Name, place, myth

Siting Marcus Aurelius

The siting process

MOST PEOPLE HAVE the experience of hanging a picture on a wall, furnishing a room or laying a table. Exact positions must be determined: there is no room for approximations. The painting, armchair or plate is either placed *here* or *there*, higher up or lower down, more to the side, at a different distance from other items—and so forth. The decisions are absolute and every change makes a difference. Qualities of colour, size and form must be considered and in the end the wall, room or table may have to be rearranged altogether. Soon the activity turns into a reshuffling of given objects, each with their individual character, and a dissatisfaction with current arrangements become a driving force behind new decisions. Such is the process of *siting*; a heightened awareness of one object in relation to other objects that results in a "conceptualized place with strong internal and external relationships".[1] Without such an attentiveness to detail, there would be no site-specific objects and no sitedness. The siting process is so common that it may well be described as an anthropological fact, taking place in all cultures regardless of historical specificities. It is a cultural phenomenon with a storyline of its own. Both the formal qualities and the identity of the object to be sited is of importance for the siting process and its result. Most important, though, is the overall idea of the design and the arrangement intuitively searched for in relation to the place where the object is to be sited. Siting is a dialectical enterprise, built upon the tensions between the organization of specific objects and general aesthetic ideals.

One of the most ingeniously sited works of art and worthy of special attention within an art-historical context is the equestrian, partly gilded, bronze statue on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. It is today believed to represent the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius—and very likely it does

1. Gillgren 2017, p. 30.

(fig. 1).[2] It is one of the most well-known works of art from Antiquity and the only full-scale equestrian bronze sculpture that has come down to modern times. It has probably never been buried underground or lost, giving it a legacy within Western culture that is perhaps unrivalled. Without doubt, its siting at the Piazza del Campidoglio has been of fundamental importance for its fame and status.

Figure 1. Unknown artist, *Marcus Aurelius*, c. AD 180. Gilded bronze. Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy.

Sometimes the statue has been understood as an early example of modern monument culture; the idea of celebrating historic events and placing important rulers at the centre of public squares. Rosalind Krauss, for example, in an important essay of 1979 singled out Marcus Aurelius as an example of the outmoded idea of sculpture as representing the "logic of the monument", in contrast with the ambiguity and loss of place that characterized the art of her own time.[3] Such an analysis is questionable, though, representing more of a historicist understanding of art, where the meaning of a work is something static, fixed to a specific name and place. Broader aesthetic issues are left out of the discourse and the individual work of art is reduced to an instance of general historical developments.

A richer interpretation was given by Joseph Brodsky in an essay from 1994. For him a monument is a vertical and "symbolic departure from the general horizontality of existence".[4] Its aspiration is often eternal, with its durable materials and direct references to history:

> Yet, even if the subject is an abstract ideal or the consequences of a momentous event, there is a detectable clash of time-frames and notions of viability, not to mention textures [...] And it occurs to one that the monument owes its genealogy to great planes, to the idea of something being seen from afar—whether in a spatial or a temporal sense. That it is of nomadic origin, for at least in a temporal sense we are all nomads.

2. A solid and up-to-date publication on the Capitol, with reprints of the most relevant documents, is Bedon 2008. Ackerman 1961, vol. 2, pp. 50–68 also publishes many of the sources.

3. Krauss 1979, p. 33. For a more developed example, see Bodart 2014.

4. Brodsky 1994, p. 40.

Eclipsed by Michelangelo's Renaissance architecture, it is still clear that the bronze statue comes "from afar", that in a sense it is foreign. It has been put there deliberately by someone from the outside. It is of a different texture; it has been shuffled in and sited. In contrast with Krauss, Brodsky seems aware of the statue's status of independence, that a present location—no matter how vertical and permanent it may seem—is always temporary and that its origin is nothing if not nomadic. It comes from somewhere and it is going somewhere.

So, it may be asked: What was the *meaning* of placing the equestrian bronze statue with remains of gilding at the Piazza di Campidoglio in the 16th century? The search for such *knowledge* leads to documents, guidebooks, histories and legends related to the statue. It also necessitates having a look at the historiography of the monument and some of the many interpretations attached to it. However, the urge to move the statue to the piazza, to give it a name and to charge the place with a specific meaning exceeds what can be gathered from historical documents and the unfolding of events. Such a qualitative leap goes beyond the continuities of pure causality. It is often a matter of social psychology, mythology and unarticulated ideals.

In the search for knowledge there should be method. Changes of perspective generate new meanings to works of art, as shown by Margaretha Thomson in her essay on Rembrandt's painting of Jeremiah for this volume. In the present case, the method is not understood as a change of perspective, though, nor as a new framing, as in Dan Karlholm's essay in this volume. Instead, the working method might be described as a siting process in itself.[5] Specific facts, ideas and ideologies are set in different arrangements, all related to the bronze in question, covered in spots. The quest for meaning is answered in terms of *sitedness*; the statue's position in relation to a naming process, a premodern understanding of public spaces and an anthropology of myths and origins.

Guidebook variations

With its unique legacy it is no wonder the bronze horse and rider has a mention in almost every guidebook to Rome there is, from the Middle Ages until today. The statue is mentioned in 10th-century pontifical sources and documents as *Caballus Constantini*, the horse of Constantine.[6]

5. On siting as method, see Gillgren 2017, pp. 18–30.
6. Freiberg 1995, p. 8.

Figure 2. Maarten van Heemskerck, *View of the Lateran Basilica, c.* 1532. Red chalk drawing on paper. Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, Germany.

It is described more fully for the first time in the widely disseminated *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* from the mid-12th century.[7] Clearly there was a debate regarding the statue's identity already at this time, because here the reader learns that the bronze horse is often called Constantine's, but that this is incorrect. Instead, the guidebook says, the figure is a Roman hero who saved his city from a foreign tyrant. An extended version of the book, the *Narratio de Mirabilia Urbis Romae* from around 1200, says that the bronze figure is called Theodoric by pilgrims, that the Romans say it is Constantine but the cardinals and clerics of Rome say Marcus Aurelius—or the legendary Republican ruler Quintus Quirinus, who gave his life for the city.[8] Again, though, it is concluded that the rider is a Roman warrior named Marcus, who once fought a foreign king.

It is difficult to say precisely when the present identification of the statue as Marcus Aurelius was established.[9] It grew gradually with Renaissance humanists of the late 15th century, such as Bartolomeo

7. Blennow & Fogelberg Rota 2019, p. 74.
8. Classen 2009, p. 167.
9. Fittschen & Zanker 1994, vol. 1, pp. 72–74.

Figure 3 a & b. Unknown artist, *Marcus Aurelius*, *c.* AD 180, Gilded bronze. Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy.

Sacchi and Berbardo Ruccelai.[10] The 1520 edition of the guidebook *Mirabilia Rome* by Francesco Albertini says Marcus Aurelius, mentioning also the identification with Constantine. In Bernardo Gamucci's guidebook from 1565, again, misidentifications such as Septimus Severus and Lucius Verus are rejected.[11] The important *Ritratto di Roma* by Pompilio Totti from 1638 mentions Marcus Aurelius only, indicating that the debate is now closed.[12]

So, by the 17th century the identification seems to have been quite firmly set: Haskell and Penny give the approximate year 1600 as the date by which it appears to have been decided.[13] However, even in guidebooks of today, authors are tempted to repeat that the statue has come down to us only because of a misnaming, that it was once thought to represent Constantine—but that it is not him. Despite the inclination of modern scholarship to pinpoint precise iconographies, names and identities, the various identifications attached to the statue have remained in public consciousness right up to the present day. Throughout the history of the monument there seems to have coexisted an urge to name together with a certain hesitance—with an awareness of the naming process as a risk. In the words of Jacques Derrida, a "risk to bind, to enslave or to engage the other, to link the called, to call him/her to respond even before any decision or any deliberation, even before any freedom".[14]

A loss of place

The origin of the bronze horse and rider is not known. Throughout the Middle Ages it was kept outside the Archbasilica of Saint John Lateran and it may have been located there all the time (fig. 2). It could also have been placed at the *Forum Romanum* or some other prominent position

10. Weiss 1969, p. 80.
11. Gamucci 1565, p. 17; Ackerman 1961, p. 70.
12. Totti 1638, p. 404.
13. Haskell & Penny 1994, p. 252. The same with Freeman 2004, p. 154.
14. Derrida 1995, p. 84.

in the ancient city. It can be said with some certainty, though, that it was not meant to be free-standing at the centre of a forum or a piazza, as it is today. It has a clear front and back (fig. 3). The horse turns its head to the right, it is lifting its right leg and the emperor stretches out his right arm with a slight twist of the head in the same direction. In contemporary prints the one-sidedness is usually corrected (fig. 4), but close up it can be seen that even the figure's eyes are directed somewhat sideways. This has led to the suggestions that the statue either was placed against a wall, which was common in the Classical period, or that it originally belonged to a pair of equestrian statues, one representing Marcus Aurelius and the other his co-emperor Lucius Verus.[15]

Figure 4. Nicolas Béatrizet, *The Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius on the Capitol*, 1548. Engraving. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States.

For Michelangelo, the dynamic movement of the horseman was very likely observed and understood as a positive quality. It is reminiscent of the twisted, *serpentinata* figures of his own design, such as the Prophets and Sibyls in the Sistine Chapel and the tomb figures of the Medici Chapel in Florence.[16] For a contemporary viewer it can also remind of Richard Serra's controversial *Tilted Arc* in New York, installed at Federal Plaza between 1981 and 1989.[17] Even though it was not placed at the centre of the plaza, the leaning steel construction was considered so dominant that it eventually had to be removed. The asymmetric design evoked unease.

The original setting of the equestrian statue just outside the Lateran Basilica is fundamental for an understanding not only of its earlier history but also for the later decision to relocate it.[18] The Lateran Basilica is the oldest Christian basilica in the world and very much related to the name of the first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great. Not only did he found the Church in the year 324 but according to legend he was also baptized here, at the famous Lateran Baptistery. This was also the place where he supposedly transferred the power of Rome and the western part of his empire to Pope Sylvester and the Church, the so-called Donation of Constantine. The palace he donated to Sylvester remained the

15. Wegner 1939, p. 42.
16. van Tuinen 2011, with further references.
17. Weyergraf-Serra & Buskirk 1991.
18. Herklotz 1985, pp. 1–43.

principal papal palace until the transfer of the curia to Avignon in 1307. The Lateran was Constantinian territory.

When the popes returned from Avignon, the Lateran Basilica was in a ruined condition, but Martin V (1417–1431) and some of his followers put great efforts into bringing it back to life again—even though others were more dedicated to the refurnishing and rebuilding of St Peter's Basilica and the Vatican Palace. Sixtus IV (1471–1484) focused much on the Lateran and among his projects was the transfer of several Antique statues to the Capitol in 1471.[19] The equestrian bronze was kept in the Lateran, though: it was given a new, prominent position in between the main entrance of the Basilica, the Papal Palace, the Baptistery and the benediction loggia, and set on a new base with an inscription. Clearly, Sixtus still insisted that the statue represented Constantine the Great.

Paul III (1534–1549) was another important patron of the Church, who while still a cardinal had governed the Lateran as its archbishop.[20] In 1537 he ordered a demolition of the medieval Lateran palace, most certainly to build a modern one—even though we know little of his further plans. The same year he asked that the equestrian statue should be moved to the Capitol.[21] Probably, the large bronze did not fit with the new plans for the Lateran and the identification with the horseman as Constantine had become untenable, both among antiquarians and the public. As is well known from mobility studies, the "push factor" is almost always more important than the "pull factor", and this applies to Renaissance culture as well.[22] The arguments for removing the statue from the Lateran were at this time well developed, while the plans for its relocation—on the Capitol or elsewhere—had not yet been formed.

It may seem strange that all through the Middle Ages the horseman could be taken for Constantine. All one had to do was to compare his face with images of relevant coins or with the figures on Constantine's well-known Triumphal Arch to see there was a difference. In contrast with his predecessors, Constantine had introduced a clean-shaven and youthful iconography, perhaps harking back to Augustus or Alexander the Great.[23] Portrait likeness had little weight in the Middle Ages, though: the context of the many important Lateran monuments and the inscrip-

19. Freiberg 1995, p. 8.
20. Freiberg 1995, pp. 9–10.
21. Buddensieg 1969; Bedon 2008, pp. 55–59.
22. Burke 2002.
23. Lanzillotta 1992, pp. 14–16; Bardill 2012, p. 11.

tion mattered more. It was not until the rise of portrait painting in the late 15th century and its enormous popularity a few decades later that the attribution became unsustainable. A decisive factor may have been the finding of the colossal head of Constantine at Constantine's Basilica in 1486.[24] If this was Constantine clearly the face of the horseman must portray someone else. Still, developments were surprisingly slow. When Titian between 1536 and 1539 painted one of the first series of Roman emperors for the Ducal Palace in Mantua, he took pride in using Antique coins and medals as his models.[25] Even so, he made the obvious mistake of providing Augustus with an out-of-character drooping moustache and curly hair. Constantine himself was represented with a short beard all through the 16th century and into the early 17th century, not only in the famous Vatican frescoes but also in the Lateran frescoes from around 1600.

The relocation of the statue provoked some protests, as can be gathered from a report sent from Rome to the duke of Urbino.[26] The conservators at the Capitol were positive, the report says, while both the Lateran chapter and the architect to be in charge of the project, Michelangelo himself, were negative "since it seemed to him to be better where it was". If his Holiness could not be persuaded, Michelangelo continued, he would also like to have "the two horses and statues from the Monte Cavallo", that is, the Dioscuri today at the Quirinal. It seems as if, at this early stage of the process, Michelangelo was content with the many Classical works of art already in place on the Capitoline Hill. If he was to have one large horse, however, Michelangelo wanted two more—probably to balance the large bronze emperor both formally and iconographically. The Dioscuri had since Antiquity been associated with brotherhood and Republicanism, repeatedly appearing as saviours of the Roman Republic on the battlefield.[27] In the Middle Ages the myths were intertwined with Christian interpretations, so that the naked Castor and Pollux could also be seen as, for example, allegories of Truth.[28]

In January 1538 the equestrian bronze statue was moved to the Capitol. It took another year until Michelangelo was formally given the commission to reconstruct the Capitoline Hill, and it is worth stressing that no

24. Bardill 2012, p. 203.
25. Wethey 1975, p. 45.
26. Ackerman 1961, vol. 2, p. 51.
27. Richardson 2013, pp. 901–918.
28. Blennow & Fogelberg Rota 2019, pp. 74–75.

plans for the projects are known from this time. Michelangelo was faced with an unruly site of diverse buildings and a collection of antiques. One of the first things he did, though, was to produce a new base for the equestrian bronze. It can be seen in different drawings and prints from around 1540 (fig. 4). In some of the prints the texts on the base can be read. On the one side is a pseudo-Antique inscription, probably produced together with the base.[29] For those well versed in Classical Roman inscriptions, the sudden appearance of an inscribed stone dedicated to the well-known statue must have come as a surprise. For others, the mention of Marcus Aurelius's many ancestors and titles probably only helped the confusion about his identity. The inscription on the other side of the base says that Paul III donated the statue of "M Antonino Pio" in 1538.[30] Some readers missed the M and took the inscription for a reference to Antoninus Pius, which was another common attribution. Even modern scholars have debated to whom the inscription is actually referring, Antoninus Pius or Marcus Aurelius.[31] The emperor, furthermore, is given the title Optimus Princeps, an honorific title given normally only to Marcus Aurelius' predecessor Trajan.[32] It seems as if the precise identity of the man on the horse was not the most important piece of information to communicate to visitors at the Capitol. The name of the donor was more relevant and the conservators involved were also given a separate inscription.

Because of financial problems and because the foundations of the piazza first had to be secured, it took quite some time before build-

29. IMP CAESARI DIVI ANTONINI F DIVI HADRIANI NEPOTI DIVI TRAIANI PARTHICI PRONEPOTI DIVI NERVAE ABNEPOTI M AVRELIO ANTONINO PIO AVG GERM SARM PONT MAX TRIB POT XXVII IMP VI COS III P P S P Q R – To the Imperator Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (son of the deified Antoninus, grandson of the deified Hadrian, great-grandson of the deified Trajan conqueror of the Parthians, great-great-grandson of the deified Nerva), pious, august, conqueror of the Germans and Sarmatians, Supreme Pontiff, invested for 27 years with the Tribunician power, acclaimed as Imperator 6 times, elected Consul 3 times, Father of his Country, the Roman Senate and People [dedicate this].

30. PAVLVS III PONT MAX STAVAM AENEAM EQVESTREM A S P Q R M ANTONINO PIO ETIAM TVM VIVENTI STATVTAM VARIIS DEINDE VRBIS CASIB EVERSAM ET A SYXTO IIII PONT MAX AD LATERAN BASILICAM REPOSITAM VT MEMO RIAE OPT PRINCIPIS CONSVLERET PATRIAEQ DECORA ATQ ORNAMENTA RESTITVERET EX HUMILIORE LOCO IN AERAM CAPITOLINAM TRANSTVLIT ATQ DICAVIT – ANN SAL M C XXXVIII – Paul III, Supreme Pontiff, that he might foster the memory of the best of emperors and restore to the nation its glories and honours, transferred from a lowlier site to Piazza del Campidoglio the bronze equestrian statue erected by the Senate and People of Rome to Marcus Aurelius Pius in his own lifetime, later overthrown in the course of the City's sundry calamities and set up again at the Lateran Basilica by Sixtus IV, Supreme Pontiff, and dedicated it in the year of Salvation 1538.

31. Ackerman 1961, *Text and Plates*, p. 68; Winner 1967, No. 8.

32. Lansford 2009, pp. 16–17.

ing could begin and the statues were given their definite positions.[33] In 1560 two other Dioscuri were unearthed and it was decided to use them at the Capitol instead of the ones from Monte Cavallo, but they were not installed until 1590 (fig. 5). Two Egyptian lions from an old Isis temple at Campo Marzio in Rome were donated by Pius IV in 1564 and reworked into fountains in 1588 (fig. 6). Michelangelo himself died in 1564 but had given instructions for the design, as can be seen from the prints made by Dupérac in 1567 after his drawings (fig. 7). Since the prints represent the Dioscuri from Monte Cavallo rather than the ones that were eventually used, the original drawings must have been produced before 1560, perhaps as early as in the 1540s.[34]

The reason for bringing the equestrian statue to the Capitoline Hill has given birth to a number of contradicting interpretations. It could be seen as a manifestation of papal power, a tribute to Emperor Charles V or as representing Rome's Classical origin in general.[35] Likewise, the Dioscuri can be interpreted as symbols of the pope and the emperor in collaboration or, in contrast, as representing republican activism in line with the legendary Tyranomachia statue.[36] The transfer to the Capitol of the equestrian statue is hard to explain, in the words of James Ackerman, not because there was no reason for it, "but because it had so many reasons".[37] The most simple and straightforward explanation, as argued above, is that it was no longer considered desirable to keep it at the Lateran. Since it could not be accepted as Constantine any more, it needed a new home and a new name. Eventually, it became Marcus Aurelius at the Capitoline Hill.

Figure 5. Unknown artist, *The Dioscuri*, *c.* AD 200. Marble. Piazza di Campidoglio, Rome, Italy.

Figure 6. Unknown artist, *Egyptian Lion*. Black basalt, probably from the 2nd century AD. Piazza di Campidoglio, Rome, Italy.

33. Ackerman 1961, vol. 2, pp. 55–56.
34. Ackerman 1961, vol. 2, pp. 61–62; Barnes 2010, pp. 125–131.
35. In his brief but important 1957 article Ackerman gave an overview of the most common and popular interpretations; the debate is still ongoing.
36. Ackerman 1957, p. 70.
37. Ackerman 1961, *Text and Plates*, p. 67.

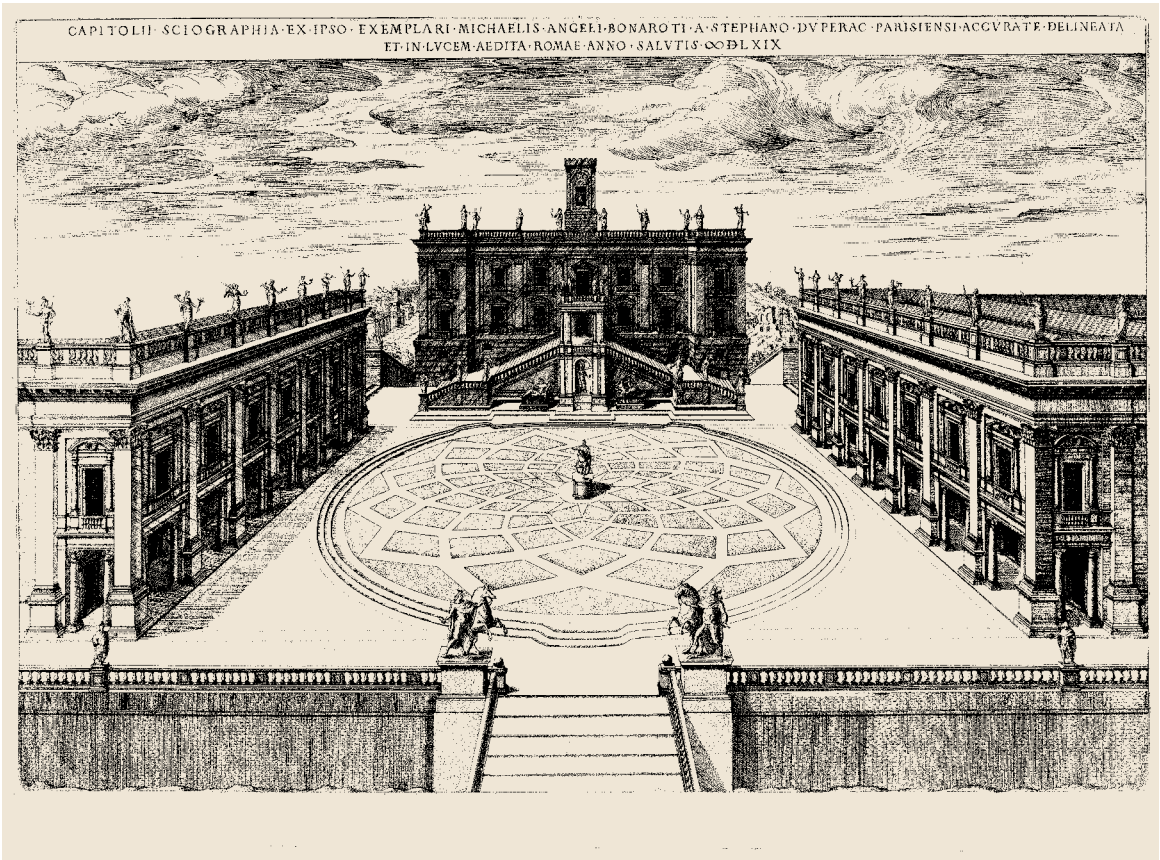

Figure 7. Étienne Dupérac, *View of the Campidoglio*, 1569. Engraving. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States.

Uncertain identities

There are few Antique bronze horses to compare with the equestrian statue at the Capitol, the most important ones being the more archaic horses at San Marco in Venice. The dating of these four horses varies greatly but it is agreed that they are of a Greek rather than Roman type.[38] They are smaller, more slender with a smooth skin and stylized mane. The one in Rome is more muscular and bony, the body is tenser and the mane wilder. This is typical of the Roman–Hellenistic style, as can be seen for example in the horses of the Dioscuri at the Capitol (fig. 5). The body of the rider is also strikingly firm, much like his horse, with a dynamic structure of muscles and bones described in detail and clearly visible beneath the smooth skin. The statue is usually dated to the 170s

38. Freeman 2004, pp. 154–157.

Figure 9. Unknown artist, *Marcus Aurelius*, c. AD 180. Bronze. Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs, Hungary.

Figure 10. Unknown artist, *Marcus Aurelius*, c. AD 180. Bronze and copper alloy with inlaid glass. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England.

← Figure 8. Unknown artist, *Marcus Aurelius*, c. AD 180. Detail. Gilded bronze. Capitoline Museums, Rome, Italy.

AD and more precisely by Fittschen and Zanker to AD 176/177.[39] The saddle cloth is of a Sarmatian type and could be connected to the victory over the Sarmatians in AD 175, but it has also been suggested that the horse originally belonged to, or is copied from, an equestrian statue of a Hellenistic ruler from about a decade earlier.[40]

The modern identification of the figure as Emperor Marcus Aurelius is, of course, based on comparisons with Roman coins and portrait busts. His iconography is generally divided into four types.[41] However, the equestrian portrait does not belong clearly to any of them (fig. 8). While the small mouth and the thin eyebrows is reminiscent of type 3, the beard and less-modelled hairstyle are closer to type 4.[42] Since the portrait does not fit well with established types, it has been argued that the statue is postmortem and produced with a variety of previous portraits as models. Such a work may have been commissioned by Marcus Aurelius's son and successor Commodus, perhaps with a pendant representing Commodus himself on horseback and manifesting the near relationship between the two emperors.[43] Compared to a similar head found in Romania in the 1970s, the face of the Capitoline figure is smoother and without the usual bony structure of eye sockets and cheeks (fig. 9).[44] On the other end of the scale is the extremely stylized and locally crafted head found in Northamptonshire in England (fig. 10).[45]

The face of the rider on the Roman equestrian statue falls somewhere in between those works, but together they point at the wide range of images to which the name of Marcus Aurelius has been attached. In any case, the Capitoline portrait falls short of both Classical ideals and traditional Roman verism. With its almond eyes, the thin, retracted lips and the ornamentally arranged beard of the chin, it displays almost Byzantine characteristics. Such a reduced sign for a beard is not to be seen in the

39. Fittschen & Zanker 1994, vol. 1, pp. 72–74.
40. Heermann-Trömel 1988; Nickel 1989; Bergemann 1991.
41. Bergmann 1978, pp. 22–28.
42. Fittschen & Zanker 1994, vol. 1, pp. 72–73.
43. Presicce 1990, p. 80.
44. Maráz 1997, pp. 24–25.
45. Walker 2014, pp. 223–242.

iconography of Marcus Aurelius elsewhere and is more common in Late Antique portraits. However, it can be seen in a classically styled marble bust of Lucius Verus, giving some strength to the argument that the Capitoline image was fashioned after a variety of portraits rather than based on an established Marcus Aurelian type (fig. 11). The impersonal character of the rider's face may have caught the attention of Michelangelo, who never painted a portrait and who preferred to give his own sculptures, for example, those representing Giuliano and Lorenzo de Medici in the Medici chapel, abstract rather than realistic features.[46]

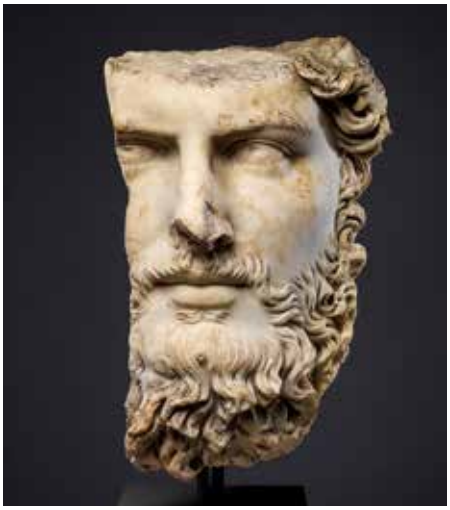

Figure 11. Unknown artist, *Lucius Verus*, *c.* AD 170. Marble. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States.

The centre of the piazza

In modern times it became customary to place statues at the centres of public squares and piazzas. In Antiquity this was not the case, nor in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance.[47] When such monuments start to appear in the early modern period they have often been thought of as symbols of absolute rulership and authority, blocking the heart of a public square to prevent citizens from taking it into possession. The equestrian statue at the Campidoglio has also been interpreted as such an intervention upon public space.[48] There could be some truth to this, even though by and large it is an interpretation founded on nationalistic ideologies of a later date than the Renaissance. What we do have from early on are fountains placed at strategic places in Rome in order to be easily accessible for its population.[49] Sometimes they were more or less centrally positioned at a piazza and at times they were artfully decorated. However, they were not thought of or designed to appear as being placed at the specific centre of a public square. The first objects that we know of to be placed in similar strategic positions in Rome are the Antique obelisks. These precious and mystical items were taken by the Romans from Egypt in the

46. Gillgren 2017, p. 61.

47. There are a few literary sources suggesting that equestrian statues at times were positioned at the central axis of a forum, most notably Ammianus Marcellinus (16.10.15) on Trajan's Forum. Even though this assumption is rejected by archaeological evidence, the passage could have had an influence on Michelangelo. There are no comparable instances from the Middle Ages. For an overview, see Bergemann 1990, pp. 16–19 and for Trajan's Forum, see Chenault 2012, p. 104.

48. Ingersoll 1985, p. 392.

49. Interestingly, the monumentalizing of Roman fountains also had its beginnings in the reign of Paul III: D'Onofrio 1986, pp. 52–59.

Classical period.[50] They usually came in pairs and were used to decorate, for example, the entrance of Augustus's mausoleum and the turnaround at the *spina* of Domitian's circus—today's Piazza Navona.

The most well-known and best documented of the Roman obelisks is the one at Piazza di San Pietro in the Vatican.[51] It was brought to Rome by Emperor Caligula for a circus that was located in what is nowadays the Vatican. In the mid-15th century Pope Nicolaus V (1447–1455) had plans for moving it to a central position at a new piazza positioned between San Angelo and Borgo. According to Torgil Magnuson "this symmetrical placing of a monument as the formal centre of the layout was an entirely new concept [...] and an innovation of the greatest importance".[52] Most likely Nicolaus V engaged Leon Battista Alberti for the project, which was never realized. Discussions continued, however. Michelangelo, among others, was approached on the matter but declined because of the technical difficulties.[53] There is a plan for the project dated 1535 in which Paul III took an active part (just as at the Capitol). It was not until 1585, however, that Sixtus V (1585–1590) was able to make the decision to move the obelisk to its present location, as a centrepiece for the newly constructed place outside St Peter's. This was in the time of the Counter Reformation and after being properly exorcised the obelisk was celebrated as a witness of Christ's victory over paganism. Soon afterwards, in 1588, an obelisk taken by Constantine the Great from Thebes and placed by his son Constantine II at Circus Maximus was moved to the Lateran.[54] It was raised in the same place that the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius had been standing 30 years earlier and became part of the new papal palace complex.

A less known but well-documented obelisk is the much smaller one that was once planned to be part of the reorganized Campidoglio.[55] The hieroglyphs make it possible to date the obelisk to the period of Ramses II (1290–1233 BC), but this is a modern discovery. No name was attached to it in the Renaissance, and it is not known when and why it was brought to Rome. Eventually, it became one of a pair that was used to decorate the entrance of the ancient Isis temple, from where the two basalt lions also came (fig. 6). One of the obelisks today stands in front of the Pantheon,

50. The best overview is given by Iversen 1968. See also D'Onofrio 1967, and, more recently, Sorek 2010.
51. Iversen 1968, vol. 1, pp. 26–46.
52. Magnuson 1958, p. 81.
53. Iversen 1968, vol. 1, p. 28.
54. Iversen 1968, vol. 1, pp. 55–64.
55. Iversen 1968, vol. 1, pp. 106–114.

the other was taken to the Capitol in the 14th century, perhaps by Cola di Renzi.[56] In the time of Paul III, probably around 1535, it was taken down again in order to be relocated at the Capitol. Plans were changed, however, and in 1582 it was given to the nobleman Circa Mattei for his new villa, known now as Villa Celimontana (fig. 12). The villa architect was Giacomo della Porta, also responsible for completing the Campidoglio in accordance with Michelangelo's plans after his death.

When Michelangelo wanted to turn down the offer of having the gilded bronze horse and rider from the Lateran relocated to the Capitol, it might have been because he did not yet have a plan for the piazza—or that he had other plans. Given the circumstances, it is possible that he intended to place the Capitoline obelisk at its centre. This would be in line with the plans for the Vatican obelisk and the St Peter's project, in which he was also engaged at the time. It would have been the first obelisk in Rome to be relocated in accordance with the new ideals for city planning. An obelisk at the centre of the Campidoglio would also explain the refined brickwork of the piazza, outlined by Michelangelo and appearing in Dupérac's prints—but not realized until the 20th century (fig. 7). In an original conception, the obelisk could have served as a *gnomon*, casting its shadow on the decorated brickwork and registering the passage of time in relation to the sun and the universe (see below, p. 75).[57] The obelisk had to give way for the horse and rider but the elaborately designed brickwork was kept. The geometrical pattern has otherwise been interpreted as representing the Capitol as caput mundi, the astronomical scheme of St Isidor of Seville or the protective power of Roman citizenship.[58]

Figure 12. Unknown artist, *The Mattei Obelisk*, 13th century BC. Granite. Garden of Villa Celimontana, Rome, Italy.

Regardless of specific meaning, it is agreed that the *ovato* is of constructive importance for the appearance of the site. According to some scholars, most importantly Harmen Thies, the equestrian statue is at the absolute centre of the piazza and the guiding principle for all of the architecture at the Capitol.[59] Others have argued that the statue is not

56. D'Onofrio 1967, pp. 209–215.
57. Ackerman 1957, pp. 73–74.
58. de Tolnay 1930, p. 25; Ackerman 1961, vol. 1, p. 72; Liebenwein 1984.
59. Thies 1982, pp. 49–83.

at all at the exact centre. How can there be a centre of a trapezoid form? Anna Bedon asks rhetorically, adding that the sculpture with its base has been moved several times during renovations and reworkings of the brickwork.[60] It is probably more correct to say that the ornamented piazza makes it look as if the statue is at the centre, regardless of its actual position in relation to the buildings. The siting process has led to the appearance of the bronze as a centrepiece, replacing the obelisk in what might have been Michelangelo's primary idea for the Campidoglio.

Hierophanies of space

Issues of foundation, centre and origin are often best answered in terms of myth and legend.[61] In his influential study *Das Heilige und das Profane* (The Sacred and the Profane) from 1957, Mircea Eliade made a distinction between the *hierophany* and *homogeneity* of space. For the religious man, he says,

> space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others [...] There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous.[62]

Typical for the sacred space is its orderliness, with clearly defined borders and a precisely defined centrepiece of mythical origin. It can be the slaying of a dragon, a well that has sprung forth, a fire or symbols of carnal death. Every sacred space has an opening towards the divine, towards the mysteriously and eternally true.[63] For Eliade, the typical example of a sacred space is the temple with its altar. Despite its title his book has little to say about—or perhaps little interest in—profane spaces.[64] It can

60. Bedon 2008, p. 57.
61. For a variety of thoughts on the issue of origin, see Pizer 1995.
62. Eliade 1963, p. 20.
63. Eliade 1963, pp. 176–179.
64. Eliade has been discussed and debated for decades and from many points of view. He has been criticized both for rigid essentialism and for problematic political sympathies. In his many publications over the years his ideas and political affiliations varied, but a sound scepticism towards defining the precise origins of, for example, religions and myths and his embrace both of the fascistoid Iron Guard of Romania and Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence revolution in India, illuminate the complexity of his thinking and much of its validity still today. Such issues are dealt with by, for example, Ellwood 1999, pp. 79–126.

be argued, though, that premodern societies were so profoundly shaped by a religious mentality that not only the temples and shrines but public spaces and piazzas, as well, followed parallel patterns. Furthermore, even in contemporary secular societies similar ideals about the formation of meaningful sites are flourishing, indicating that ideas about the organization of places are of a fundamentally human nature and not to be associated with the religious sentiment only.

The origins of cities, forums and architecture

A look at the treatises on the foundation of cities, forums and architecture that were most readily accessible in the Renaissance period point in the same direction. Questions of origin are dealt with in a dialogical fashion, as qualitative leaps made possible by presenting unclear mixtures of ideas and anecdotes for the reader. For Vitruvius the origin of architecture is man's discovery of fire.[65] To begin with, people were terrified of it and fled the furious flames. Then they realized that they could have warmth and comfort from it and started to keep it alive:

> And so, as they kept coming together in great numbers into one place, finding themselves naturally gifted beyond the other animals in not being obliged to walk with faces to the ground, but upright and gazing upon the splendor of the starry firmament, and also in being able to do with ease whatever they chose with their hands and fingers, they began in that first assembly to construct shelters.[66]

When it comes to the founding of cities Vitruvius insists on the methods of old times:

> Our ancestors, when about to build a town or an army post, sacrificed some of the cattle that were wont to feed on the site proposed and examined their livers [...] They never began to build defensive works in a place until after they had made many such trials and satisfied themselves that good water and food had made the liver sound and firm.[67]

65. Vitruvius 1970, p. 38–41; *De architectura*, II:1.
66. Vitruvius 1970, p. 38; *De architectura*, II:1:2.
67. Vitruvius 1970, p. 20; *De architectura*, I:4:9.

Preferably in the middle of the city should be a forum dedicated to Mercury, messenger of the Gods and protector of the arts and trades.[68] "In the very center of that spot set up a bronze *gnomon* or 'shadow tracker.' At about the fifth hour in the morning, take the end of the shadow cast by this gnomon, and mark it with a point etc."[69] Marking out further points from this central place, the quarters of the city should be lined out in orderly sections. It seems plausible that Vitruvius's text directly influenced the Renaissance projects regarding the old obelisks in Rome and the grid at the Piazza di Campidoglio (see above, p. 72).

Leon Battista Alberti's ideas about the origin of architecture are also founded in myth and in speculations on the beginnings of mankind:

> In the beginning men sought a place of rest in some region/*regio* safe from danger; having found a place both suitable and agreeable, they settled down and took possession of the site/*situs* [...] Whoever it was who first started to do these things, the goddess Vesta, daughter of Saturn, or the brothers Heuralius and Hiperbius, or Gallio, or Tharso, or the Cyclops Typhinicus, I believe that such was the original occasion and the original ordinance of building.[70]

The concept of *regio* is important to Alberti, defined by the ruler's capacity to control the surroundings and his political power. It is also related to the drawing out of lines and borders. The site/*situs* or *area* is a more conceptualized space and characterized by its well-organized walls, buildings and monuments. The site is the place from which the region is controlled.

Alberti was also familiar with the tradition of founding cities through animal sacrifices and that "the ancients, Varro and Plutarch among others, mention that our ancestors used to set out the walls of their cities according to religious rite and custom".[71] This was done not only in order to find the best available site for a city but to give "the soothsayers the opportunity to predict its future". The Etruscans, he claims, could even determine the future ages of the city from such evidence. He is much concerned with the building of protective walls for the city, preferring the circular form over other possibilities. At the centre of the city circle, at a

68. Vitruvius 1970, pp. 31–32; *De architectura*, I:7:1.
69. Vitruvius 1970, pp. 26–27; *De architectura*, I:6:6–7.
70. Alberti 1988, pp. 7–8; *De Re Aedificatoria*, I:2.
71. Alberti 1988, p. 101; *De Re Aedificatoria*, IV:3.

cross-road, should be a forum surrounded by a portico. Alberti says nothing about the centre of the forum and focuses instead on its entrances, saying that "the greatest ornament to the forum or cross-road would be to have an arch at the mouth of each road".[72] Important sites should, however, be well conceptualized. This can be achieved in different ways, through natural phenomena such as rocks and springs, planted trees, the erection of columns and obelisks, the giving of a dignified name to the place as well as through the establishing of specific rules for the site.

> A most appropriate way to make a place more dignified is through good taste and ingenious measures, such as the laws that prohibit any male from entering the temple of Bona Dea, or that of Diana by the patrician portico; likewise at Tanagra no female may enter the grove of Eunostus, nor the inner parts of the temple in Jerusalem.[73]

The relationship between site and region, as well as with the provinces, is dealt with in some of Alberti's other writings as well, usually in connection with aspects of power and rule. In the present context his pamphlet *Descriptio Urbis Romae* is also interesting. Alberti sets out to define the positions of

> the walls, the river, and the streets of the city of Rome, as well as the sites and locations of the temples, public works, gates, and commemorative monuments, and the outlines of the hills, not to mention the area which is occupied by habitable buildings, all as we know them to be in our time.[74]

The origin of all the observations is "the center of the city, that is, from the Capitol".[75]

Filarete in his *Treatise on Architecture* follows Vitruvius and Alberti but is less ideological and more anecdotal than the others:

> There is no doubt that architecture was invented by man, but we cannot be certain who was the first man to build houses and habitation. It is to be believed that when Adam was driven out of Paradise,

72. Alberti 1988, p. 265; *De Re Aedificatoria*, VIII:6.
73. Alberti 1988, p. 161; *De Re Aedificatoria*, VI:4.
74. Alberti 2007, p. 1; *Descriptio Urbis Romae*, § 1.
75. Alberti 2007, p. 1; *Descriptio Urbis Romae*, § 2.

> it was raining. Since he had nothing else to cover [himself], he put his hands over his head to protect himself from the rain. Since he was constrained by necessity to [find his] living, both food and shelter, he had to protect himself from bad weather and rain. Some say that before the Flood there was no rain. I incline to the affirmative, [for], if the earth was to produce its fruits, it had to rain. Since both food and shelter are necessary to the life of man, it is believed for this reason that after Adam had made a roof of his hands and had considered the need for his sustenance, he thought and contrived to make some sort of habitation to protect himself from the rain and also from the heat of the sun. When he recognized and understood his need, we can believe that he made some kind of shelter of branches, or a hut, or perhaps some cave where he could flee when he needed. If such was the case, it is probable that Adam was the first.[76]

In the following Filarete outlines the building of his ideal city *Sforzinda*. The foundation of the city is a dramatic and violent history. The exact time of laying the foundation stone is ritually calculated and a ceremonial procession is arranged:

> When they arrived at the determined place, the bishop and the other clergy performed a solemn ceremony suitable to such an act and blessing the stone, the site, and everything else. With great solemnity of music and chant, the things were put in.[77]

During the ceremony a large and beautiful serpent appears. A person present tries to attack it but the snake "wrapped itself around his neck and squeezed so hard that it took his life".[78] After killing the man, the serpent went to "the center where the piazza was laid out". In the middle of the piazza there was a large laurel tree. The serpent entered the tree and disappeared among a swarm of bees: "Everyone watching was half stupefied by this event. My lord said: 'Certainly these are omens of great significance.'"

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76. Filarete 1965, p. 10; *Trattato di architettura*, 4v.
77. Filarete 1965, p. 47; *Trattato di architettura*, 26v.
78. Filarete 1965, p. 47; *Trattato di architettura*, 27r.

Foundation offerings

In all three examples above, myth and human or animal sacrifice plays an important part in explaining and deciding about the origin and construction of sites and buildings.[79] There is no mention of placing images of rulers or other important individuals at the centre of public places. According to anthropologists, human sacrifices in connection with the founding of settlements and shrines were widely spread in premodern societies.[80] Often they can be substituted with replacement offerings, such as animals, food, libations etc. There is a connection with the tradition of erecting chapels on sites of martyrdom and with the tradition of relics within the Catholic Church. However, it has also been argued that the practice of building sacrifices has more the character of magic than a conventional sacrifice. Slaves, prisoners of war or strangers are often "offered", rather than matters of more personal concern.[81] It is also a way of giving the site a new spirit and character; bringing it into the common narrative of a people, social congregation or family. The papal gift to the Campidoglio and the giving up of the idea of the statue as representing Constantine the Great, giving him a new and non-Christian identity, can be read as such a foundation offering; a papal sacrifice for the benefit of a new public centre in Rome.

Uncertain legacies

Michelangelo's siting of the equestrian statue at the centre of the piazza can be seen as a model for the following centuries. If, however, we limit ourselves to the 16th century, the examples are not numerous or even very close to the artistic achievement at the Campidoglio. Giambologna's statues of Cosimo I (1594) and Ferdinando I (1608) are at approximate centres of their respective piazza in Florence but they do not at all give the same impression of sitedness.[82] They don't stand in the same strong relationship with the surrounding architecture and they don't relate in the same way to passages and visitors as in Michelangelo's case. Further-

79. Somewhat later, in 1550, Giorgio Vasari writes self-confidently but less precisely than the others that the origin of "all these arts is Nature herself, that the inspiration or model was the beautiful fabric of the world, and that the Master who taught us was that divine light infused in us by a special act of grace which has not only made us superior to other animals but even similar, if it is permitted to say so, to God Himself" (Vasari 1991, pp. 3–4).

80. Sartori 1898; Eliade 1963, pp. 54–58.

81. Sartori 1898, p. 28.

82. Erben 1996.

Figure 13. *View of the Campidoglio*, 2020.

more, as recently deceased rulers and newly produced works of art, they are all too easily named and identified; they lack the archaic aura of the Campidoglio bronze. Much more than Marcus Aurelius they are pointing towards the modern taste for representational and political symbolism at public places. It may well be that the bronze on the Capitol served as an inspiration for later enterprises, but in many ways it is closer to the obelisk at St Peter's than to the nearby equestrian statue of the Vittorio Emanuele II monument (1895–1911). What is certain, though, is that the Campidoglio bronze has been retrospectively interpreted in line with later political projects, such as the statues of Louis XIII at Place des Vosges in Paris, Peter the Great at the Senate Square in St Petersburg or, for that matter, the Robert E. Lee monument of the Lee Park in Charlottesville.

Vignette

Experiencing the Campidoglio site in its totality would be worthy a study of its own, in line with Lena Liepe's work on the crypt of Lund Cathedral (in the present volume), but there is no room for that here. In brief: accessing the Capitoline Hill means passing in between two Egyptian lion fountains of black basalt, strolling the long slope of the *cordonata* up to the huge white marble Dioscuri at the top of the stairs only to be confronted with the equestrian bronze of the piazza, the symbolic founding piece of Michelangelo's ensemble of buildings at the site (fig. 13). For the egological mind, confronting a centre outside itself is always somewhat disturbing; be it a provocation or a revelation.[83] With all its otherness, the bronze manages to regulate the visitors, the public space and the architecture of the piazza. In many ways it materializes both the Renaissance idea of microcosmos and the postmodern definition of an artistic site, with its choreographed pathways, clear boundaries and well-defined centre. However, the centre tends to be unstable and mythical. The uncertain identity and origin of the equestrian statue in the Lateran was never a hindrance for placing it at the centre of the Capitoline piazza, nor its blank face, nor the tilted posture. On the contrary, like martyrs, fountains and obelisks, the statue came with a storyline that quieted all questions about precise historical detail and identity. Unwanted and dismissed from the Lateran, it found a new life and refuge at the Capitol. Today, because of contemporary air pollution, it has been decided that it cannot stay at the piazza. Two hundred years of museum praxis makes it natural for the bronze to depart indoors, to the Capitoline Museums, where it has been given a prominent but rather sterile gallery display. The piazza, the architecture and the living sky above are sadly missing, robbing it of some of its best qualities. Outside at the centre of the piazza is, since 1997, a rather dull replica, lacking the original's unique historical patina. How later generations will evaluate the relocation is too early to say. No doubt, there will be different opinions and a variety of interpretations.

At the end of his essay on Marcus Aurelius, Joseph Brodsky finds himself at the Capitoline Hill once more. It is a wintery night and he is alone on the piazza, hiding from the rain under the arcades: "And suddenly—presumably because of the rain and the rhythmic pattern of Michelangelo's pilasters and arches—all got blurred, and against that

83. Mosès 2003, pp. 123–127.

blur, the shining statue, devoid of any geometry, seemed to be moving."[84] True to its nomadic origin, the legend is by definition on the move. So must sited knowledge take a step out of the historical continuum and straightforward causality. Being both horizontal and vertical, it can never be more exact than it is temporary.

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84. Brodsky 1994, p. 53.

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